

CHAMBA PAINTING

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CHAMBA PAINTING

Chamba is situated in the heart of north-western Himalayas. The ancient capital of the state was Brahmaur, in the upper Ravi Valley which still has a number of ancient temples. The town of Chamba, situated on the Ravi, derives its name from Champāvatī, a daughter of Rājā Sahila Varman (c. A.D. 920) in whose honour her father built the Chamasni temple. On account of its situation in a remote and inaccessible part of the Himalaya, Chamba escaped the iconoclasm of the Muslim invaders. Hence ancient Hindu temples in their pristine beauty can still be seen in this city. At the back of the city is the old palace, the Rang Mahal, adorned with frescoes in various stages of decay. Fortunately a number of them have been rescued and brought to the National Museum in New Delhi.

The people of Chamba, particularly the Gaddi women, are known for their good looks. We perhaps see a reflection of the beauty of these enchantresses in some of the Chamba paintings.

The Rājās of Chamba bore the suffix of Varman up to the middle of the sixteenth century, and the last monarch with such a name was Pratāp Singh Varman (A.D. 1559), a contemporary of Akbar. It was during his reign that Chamba became a tributary of the Mughal empire. Prithvī Singh (A.D. 1641-1664) visited Delhi during the reign of Shāh Jahān and it is said that on account of his good looks was even seen by the ladies of the harem.

The collections of Hill Rājās have a particular importance in the study of provenance and style of paintings. No doubt, most of the collections with the Rājās are mixed and along with paintings which were painted in the particular State there are others too which were acquired as dowries, gifts or by purchase. By a careful study, however, it is possible at times to find out which paintings belong to the local school. While the Rājās' collections in most of the Hill States have been dispersed, Chamba was fortunate in preserving its art heritage more or less intact. Rājā Bhuri Singh, an enlightened prince, donated his entire collection for a museum named after him at Chamba in September 1908. The museum was organised by Dr. J. Ph. Vögel. Paintings were added to the Rājā's collection by purchase from various places in the Kangra Valley by Vögel, but it is known which of the paintings belong to the Rājā's collection. Vögel published a carefully prepared catalogue and in Section D thereof the paintings are catalogued with brief descriptive notes. In the catalogue two portraits, one of Rājā Rāj Singh, and the other of Rājā Jit Singh and his Rānī Śāradā, are reproduced in monochrome.

Coomaraswamy does not say much about painting in Chamba. In his pioneer study *Rajput Painting*, he frankly states, "I regret, however, that I cannot speak with authority about the painting of Chamba. It may be inferred from various considerations that it is intermediate in character between the Jammu Dogra styles and the more polished schools of Kangra." As we will see later, this was rather wide off the mark.

O.C. Gangoly in his portfolio entitled *Masterpieces of Rajput Painting* described a number of paintings from Guler as belonging to the school of Chamba. These included a portrait of Prakāsh Chand, Rājā of Guler.

Another scholar who took interest in Chamba painting is W.G. Archer. In his *Indian Painting in the Punjab Hills*, referring to Rāj Singh's victories over the forces of Jammu (A.D. 1775), Basohli (A.D. 1782), and Kashtwar (A.D. 1786), he mentions, "Such triumphs must obviously have deeply impressed the other states and it would not be impossible, if drawn by his expanding power and influence, certain Guler artists migrated to Chamba, taking with them the Guler style."

The problem of painting in Chamba also attracted the attention of Hermann Goetz. From his study of sculptures and wooden panels of Kothi Brahmor in Chamba State, now in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, he attributed them to A.D. 1670 during the reign of Chattar Singh (A.D. 1664-1690). Hermann Goetz also provided a comprehensive review of art in Chamba in a paper entitled *The Art of Chamba in the Islamic Period*.

Karl Khandalavala comprehensively discussed the problems of Chamba painting in his *Pahārī Miniature Painting*. He discounts the view expressed by Hermann Goetz that painting was practised in Chamba in the reign of Prithvī Singh (A.D. 1641-1664). He reproduced a portrait of Udai Singh of Chamba (A.D. 1690-1720). He believes that the portraits of Jai Singh and Sakhat Singh, sons of Prithvī Singh, were painted during the rule of Ugar Singh (A.D. 1720-1735) and Dalel Singh (A.D. 1735-1748). He also reproduces a number of paintings from Chamba and corrects wrong ascriptions of paintings from Chamba by earlier scholars.

In the account which follows, I have taken into consideration the research into Chamba painting which has been done so far. A visit to Chamba in March 1960 proved particularly fruitful. It provided an opportunity of examining the collection of paintings in the Bhuri Singh Museum and also some important private collections of the old families of Chamba. Amongst the latter, two bear the names of artists, and these were subsequently purchased by Jagdish Mittal of Hyderabad who has been very kind to lend some examples from his collection for reproduction in this portfolio.

Painting in Chamba can be divided into four distinct phases, viz. Basohli (A.D. 1720-1764), Guler-Chamba (A.D. 1770-1808), Sikh (A.D. 1820-1850) and a revivalist phase during the middle of the nineteenth century. Portraits of Prithvī Singh (A.D. 1641-1664), Chattar Singh (A.D. 1664-1690), and Umed Singh (A.D. 1748-1764) in primitive hill style are in the Bhuri Singh Museum and have been reproduced by Karl Khandalavala in his study *Pahārī Miniature Painting*. Khandalavala believes that the portraits of Prithvī Singh and Chattar Singh are not contemporary. This conclusion seems to be correct. On my visit to the Bhuri Singh Museum in 1960 I found that these three paintings are possibly by the same artist who painted the portrait of Umed Singh. All three have heavy black and red borders and the pigments used are similar. A comparison of the portrait of Umed Singh with that labelled Prithvī Singh shows that they are identical with some changes made in the design of cushions and carpets. Both appear to be of Umed Singh.

I. BASOHLI PHASE (c. A.D. 1720-1764)

What is the evidence of the existence of painting in Chamba in the early eighteenth century? Pl. VI illustrates the earliest stage. A portrait of Ugar Singh (A.D. 1720-1735) has been reproduced by Archer in *Indian Painting in the Punjab Hills* which he dated A.D. 1730. Archer, however, ascribes it to Jammu. In A.D. 1735 Chamba town was burnt down by Ugar Singh to thwart his rival Dalel Singh. Goetz believes that the paintings in the early style must have been burnt in that fire.

There is a series of paintings of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in a style which is peculiar to Chamba, and which has not been seen elsewhere in the Punjab Hills. In these paintings the crowns of the trees are pyramidal, the sky is bluish grey and the ground is yellowish green. The cattle are painted in the Basohli manner and the cowherds with peaked caps and drawers also resemble their counterparts in Basohli paintings. The borders of the paintings are deep red, another characteristic of Basohli paintings. A lock of hair invariably decorates the side face of the women. The faces of male and female figures have a remote resemblance to Mughal painting. That is why Goetz calls them Mughal-Basohli. The treatment of clouds and water is very individual. It is surprising that mountains are not shown in these paintings. The last painting of the series showing Kṛishṇa installing Ugrasena as king of Mathura, bears an inscription in Takri, which according to Vishwa Chander Ohri indicates that this series was painted by Lohru, a carpenter, for Miān Shamsheer Singh, younger brother of Rājā Umed Singh, and completed on 9th February, 1758. Some of the artists in the Kangra Valley were carpenters by caste.

It is very likely that the early style prevailed in Chamba from about A.D. 1725 in the reign of Ugar Singh to the close of A.D. 1764 when Umed Singh died. If this were so, one should presume that the portrait of Ugar Singh referred to as painted in Jammu by Archer was, in fact, painted at Chamba. This style continued during the rule of Umed Singh, who is described as 'a just ruler and an able administrator' by Vögel. Umed Singh also began the construction of the Rang Mahal, a garden palace.

A series of *Rāmāyaṇa* paintings with clouds shown in the form of spirals, and characteristic treatment of the crowns of trees is more refined than the series of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It may be attributed to the last years of the reign of Umed Singh, viz. A.D. 1760-1765.

II. GULER-CHAMBA PHASE (A.D. 1770-1808)

Though the issue is controversial several writers are of the view that the earliest centre of painting in the Kangra style was Guler. Artists must have been practising at Haripur-Guler during the rule of Dalip Singh (A.D. 1695-1743), if a note in the *Daliparañjanī* dated A.D. 1703 which refers to their presence, is correct. Moreover, portraits of Dalip Singh in half-Mughal, half-Guler style exist, and these can hardly be later than A.D. 1720. Painting in the new style was done on a large scale for Govardhan Chand from A.D. 1743 onwards.

Who were the artists who created the new style of painting? It has been established that the best series of Kangra paintings were the products of a family of artists who were descendants of Pandit Seu, viz. his sons Mānak and Nainsukh and their descendants. Several members of this family belonged to Haripur-Guler, and from there some members migrated also to other States. Nikkā, a son of Nainsukh, settled in

village Rajol, Taluka Rihlu, in the reign of Rāj Singh of Chamba. Rihlu was under the suzerainty of the Rājās of Chamba at that time. According to Goswamy, who refers to a settlement record, Nikkā is described as from Guler.

There is a painting 'Rāj Singh Watching a Dancer' in N.C. Mehta collection, now at the Sanskar Kendra at Ahmedabad, in which he is depicted as a beardless youth, hardly fifteen years of age. Rāj Singh (A.D. 1764-1794) was born in A.D. 1755, and was only nine years old when he became Rājā of Chamba. So the painting must have been painted about A.D. 1772. Khandalavala states that the famous Ushā-Aniruddha series of Chamba paintings (Pl. VI) can be attributed to Rām Lāl, and he believes that it is Rām Lāl who painted the portrait of young Rāj Singh to which we have already referred. Now this Rām Lāl was the fourth son of Nainsukh. Hence it is interesting to find that Nikkā and Rām Lāl were working for Rāj Singh at Chamba. Rāj Singh was a contemporary of Prakāsh Chand of Guler (A.D. 1773-1790) who had a wife from Chamba. Hence there is a strong evidence of cultural links between the States of Guler and Chamba which led to the development of painting at Chamba.

The earliest mention of Chamba painting is by the traveller Ujfalvy, a Frenchman of Hungarian descent who met Rājā Shām Singh of Chamba in A.D. 1881. "The Raja of Chamba showed me a number of miniatures which depict the history of his ancestors, and which are unparalleled in the freshness of their colouring and the delicacy of execution," observes Ujfalvy. He obtained some paintings from the Rājā, six of which he describes and reproduces in the account of his travels.

Ujfalvy left a particularly interesting description of Rāj Singh with his Rāṇī Naginu of Bhadarwah in the garden of Rajnagar, which is now in the Louvre, Paris. Rajnagar Palace was erected in A.D. 1755 during the rule of Umed Singh and had a Mughal Char-Bagh with two pavilions. It was destroyed in A.D. 1775.



Describing the painting, Ujfalvy writes, "The third picture: the prince has married, his beard has grown longer, his face is more expressive. Wrapped in a splendid garment of silk, and bejewelled with gold, pearls and precious stones, he is about to leave the terrace with his young wife for a stroll in his highly geometrically laid out garden. In his right hand he holds the stem of his hooka, wrapped golden thread, and carried before him by a charming slave girl. With the left hand he tightly clasps his young wife. One can hardly think of anything more moving or charming than this twosome lovingly clinging close together and gazing into each other's eyes." This painting has been reproduced by Archer in his *Indian Painting in the Punjab Hills*, and has been dated c. A.D. 1790 by him. It is a tender painting and can be regarded as one of the masterpieces of Chamba-Guler painting. The conventions of the Guler artists, viz. cypresses alternating with mangoes, poppies in the parterres, and the characteristic female facial formula, are seen in this painting. It is likely that it may have been painted by Nikkā (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Rāj Singh with his Rāṇī in the garden of Rajnagar. Louvre, Paris.

In his earlier portraits, Rāj Singh has a closely trimmed pointed beard. In another painting in the collection of the Bhuri Singh Museum, in which he figures only with his Rāṇī from Bhadarwah, his appearance is similar. In his later portraits Rāj Singh has a long flowing beard.

The embroideries called Chamba *rumāls*, which, according to Goetz, is an application of Afghan-Persian embroidery technique to Rajput designs, first appeared during the rule of Rāj Singh. The art was an

importation from Kangra and Basohli. In one of these is shown the wedding of Jit Singh with Princess Śārādā of Jammu, and has been dated A.D. 1783 by Goetz.

Patronage of painting which was started by Rāj Singh was continued by his successor Jit Singh (A.D. 1794-1808). Jit Singh was only nineteen years of age when he ascended the *gaddi*. His first concern was the neighbouring State of Basohli whose rulers periodically attacked Chamba. In A.D. 1800 Jit Singh invaded Basohli, and defeated Bijai Pāl, the ruler. He, however, acted generously and restored the conquered territory on payment of a war indemnity.

Though no building of any importance was constructed during his reign he patronised artists. Rām Lāl, Chhaju and Harkhu were his principal artists. The favourite themes of these artists, apart from portraiture, were Keśavadāsa's *Rasikapriyā*, Bārāmāsā from the *Kavipriyā*, Bihārī's *Sat Sai* and the romance of Aniruddha and Ushā.

The paintings of a fine Aniruddha-Ushā series are now partly in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, and partly in the Chandigarh Museum. Those in the Chandigarh Museum were acquired by me from Miān Nihāl Singh who belongs to the royal family of Chamba. According to Khandalavala, another Aniruddha-Ushā series, formerly in the National Museum, New Delhi, was painted at Chamba by the artist Rām Lāl (Pl. VI). Rām Lāl was the fourth son of the famous artist Nainsukh. These paintings are characterised by delicate naturalism and brilliancy of colours. The female figures are exquisitely beautiful and are characterised by a gliding grace and aristocratic elegance.

III. THE SIKH PHASE (A.D. 1820-1850)

Charhat Singh (A.D. 1808-1844) was only six years of age when he succeeded his father Jit Singh. Now painting in Chamba enters the Sikh phase. It lacks that freshness and charm which it possessed during the rule of Rāj Singh and Jit Singh.

Though we may dismiss the bulk of painting of Charhat Singh's period as dull and crude, occasionally we see some charming specimens as in Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. The Joy of Rains. State Museum, Lucknow.

A number of murals were painted in the Rang Mahal under the patronage of Charhat Singh.

IV. REVIVAL OF THE CHAMBA STYLE

A revival of the Chamba style took place during the rule of Śrī Singh (A.D. 1844-1870). The Rang Mahal was completed and murals in the Akhand-Chandi palace were retouched in oil.

Apart from wall painting with genre themes, a genuine revival of the old Chamba style took place during the rule of Śrī Singh. A local artist named Tārā Singh painted a *Rāmāyaṇa* series.

A series of *Bārāmāsā* paintings in the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, can also be attributed to Tārā Singh.

Tārā Singh died in 1871 and with him, it seems, the tradition of miniature painting in Chamba also came to a close.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. I. *Rājā Jit Singh of Chamba with His Rāṇī.*

Chamba, circa A.D. 1800.

Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. Size 26.7 × 21.6 cm.

Jit Singh (A.D. 1794-1808) was a keen patron of the art of painting. In this painting Jit Singh is seated in a pavilion overlooking the river Ravi. Opposite him is his wife Rāṇī Śārādā. In attendance are splendidly attired maid-servants, one holding a fly-whisk of peacock feathers, another a *huqqā* with a long trailing stem, and the third a gold tray with betel leaves. The fourth dressed in yellow clothes is waving a *chaurī* of yak's tail over the Rāṇī's head. In front a fountain is bubbling and at its sides are poppies growing in parterres. A pair of ducks in playful mood interposed between the fountain and the pavilion conveys feelings of love, and creates a mood which pervades the atmosphere. It seems this painting too was painted by Chhajju, who was the grandson of Nainsukh.

Pl. II. *Humiliation of Rukmaṇa.*

From a Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa Series. Chamba, A.D. 1780-1790.

Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. Size 32 × 20.9 cm.

Kṛishṇa reached Kundalpur, the capital of Bhīshmaka, where preparations were going on for the marriage of Rukmiṇī with Śīsupāla. Balarāma followed him with a large army of the Yādavas. Rukmiṇī was despairing of the success of her messenger's mission, when he came and informed her of the arrival of Kṛishṇa. Rukmiṇī arrived at the temple of the Devī with an escort. Having perambulated round Devī, "that moon-faced one, of the colour of the champak blossom, with eye like a deer, voice like the cuckoo, gait like an elephant, taking her friends, being in anxiety about meeting Hari, was about to depart,"¹ says the *Prema Sāgara*. Kṛishṇa seated in his chariot, arrived where all the warriors attendant on Rukmiṇī were standing. On seeing Kṛishṇa, the guards became confounded and their weapons dropped from their hands. Kṛishṇa seized Rukmiṇī and lifted her on his chariot. Rukmaṇa pursued Kṛishṇa with an army. Kṛishṇa cut down all weapons which Rukmaṇa discharged at him. He attacked Kṛishṇa with a club. Kṛishṇa seized him and was about to kill him. On the behest of Rukmiṇī he spared his life, but asked his charioteer to tie his hands behind his back. In the meantime Balarāma, who had defeated the army of Asuras, also arrived on an elephant, and requested Kṛishṇa to release his brother-in-law who had suffered enough humiliation. This is the scene shown in this painting. The curved hill with a light yellow wash at the top is a convention of Guler artists. The painting is of excellent quality, and is very likely the work of Nikkā, who was one of the best artists of Prakāsh Chand of Guler and later on of Rāj Singh of Chamba.

Pl. III. *Sudāmā Takes Leave of Kṛishṇa.*

Chamba, A.D. 1780-1790.

Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba. Size 29.5 × 20.2 cm.

In this painting Kṛishṇa is seen bowing to departing Sudāmā and the ladies of the palace are peering through a curtain watching the scene. As he was going along towards his home he was pondering over the situation. He did not make any request to Kṛishṇa, lest he may regard him as avaricious. He was wondering how he would explain the matter to his wife who would be disappointed over the fruitless journey.

¹ Pincott, *The Prema Sāgara*, London 1897, p. 167.

On reaching home he found a palace standing on the site of his hut. Inside he saw his wife wearing fine clothes and ornaments. Now he realized that it was hardly necessary to make a request to Kṛishṇa who knows the desires of every individual.

The undulating green hills with a light yellow wash at the top, and the way trees are painted are Guler characteristics which we see in this magnificent painting. The picture is in two parts, the left half shows the regal affluence of Kṛishṇa in his gilded palace, and the right half the simplicity of nature and the stark poverty of Sudāmā clad in rags.

Pl. IV. *The Expectant Heroine (Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā)*.
Chamba, circa A.D. 1800. Attributed to the artist Harkhu.
Jagdish and Kamala Mittal Museum, Hyderabad. Same size.

Ashṭa Nāyikā or the 'Eight Heroines,' the eight-fold classification of nāyikās, has provided a delightful theme to Pahārī artists. In this lovely painting, the Chamba artist Harkhu portrays Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā, the expectant heroine. She awaits for her lover seated on a bed of leaves covered with jasmines. In the background is a mango tree clasped by a Mādhavī creeper whose blossom-laden branches dangle over the nāyikā's sylvan retreat. In front is a lotus pool. The night is studded with stars. A timid doe is drinking water from the pool. One can almost feel the silence of the night.

Pl. V. *The Radiant Damsel*.
An illustration to Bihārī *Sat Sai*, Chamba, circa A.D. 1810.
Jagdish and Kamala Mittal Museum, Hyderabad. Same size.

The *Sat Sai* of the Hindi poet Bihārī was a favourite text with Pahārī artists. A series of paintings of the *Sat Sai* by Kangra artists is in the collection of Mahārājā of Tehri-Garhwal. The Chamba artists also painted a series based on the verses of the *Sat Sai* out of which we reproduce this painting which illustrates the following verse of Bihārī :

Taṭkī dhoī dhovātī, chaṭkīlī mukh jot
Lasat rasoī ke vagar, jagar magar dutī hot.

Clad in a newly washed garment, the nāyikā is cooking;
The kitchen is shining with the radiance of her lovely face.¹

Sitting in a corner, the nāyikā, clad in a white sārī, is stirring lentils in a boiling pot. Her jet black tresses reach her waist, and her face is serene and beautiful. Scattered around her is a bundle of firewood, a pitcher of water, a basket containing vegetables, piles of brinjals and lotus leaves, a bunch of plantains and cooking utensils. In the background, Kṛishṇa is seated on a terrace, while the female messenger is describing to him the charm of the nāyikā's face.

Plate VI. *Balarāma Diverting the Course of the Jamunā*.
Chamba-Basohli, circa A.D. 1700-1710.
Karl Khandalavala Collection. Same size.

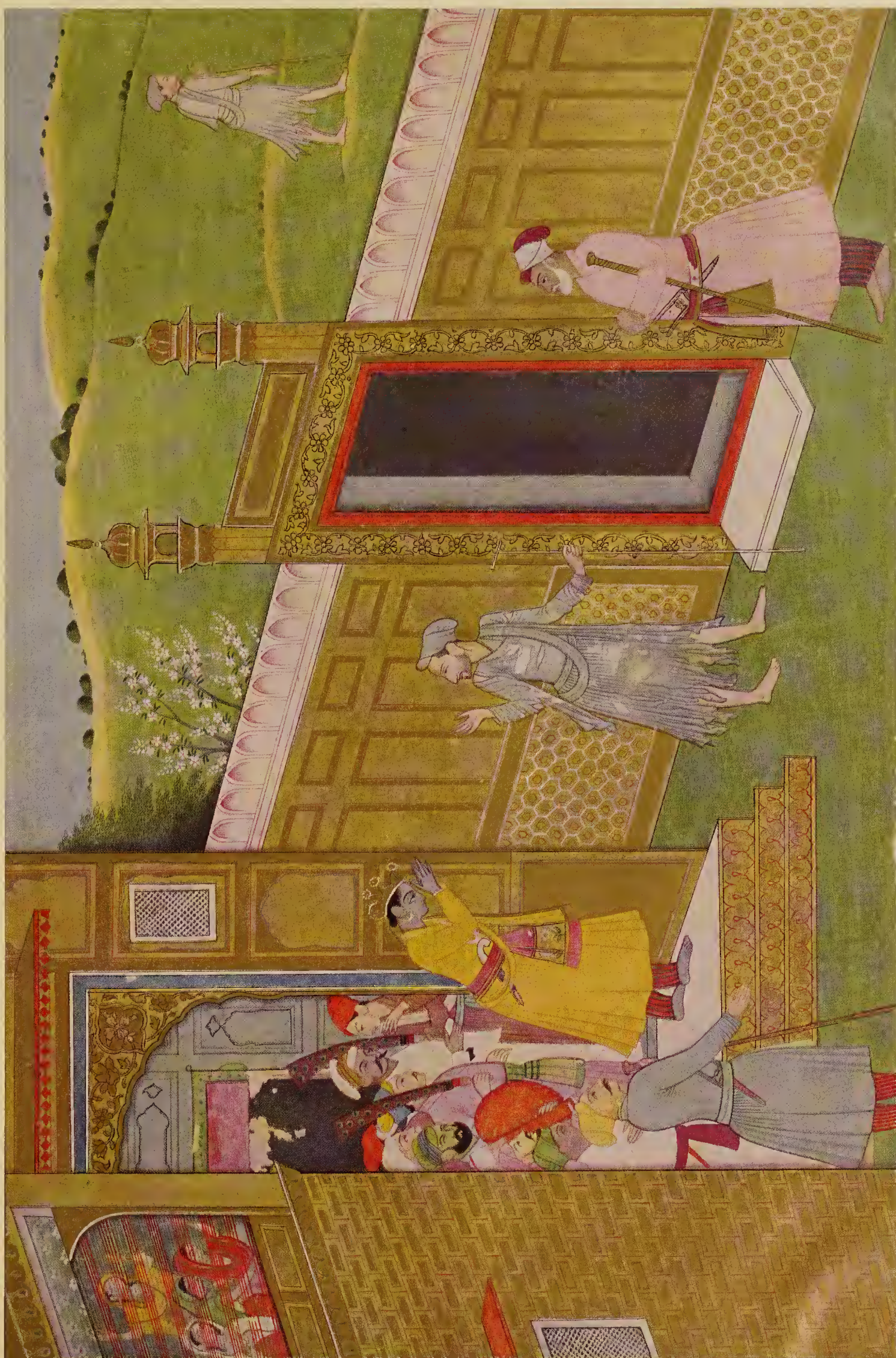
This painting illustrates an anecdote from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, when Balarāma, while dancing with the milkmaids under the influence of wine, commanded the Jamunā to flow to his feet so that he might bathe conveniently. Jamunā, in her conceit, paid no attention to Balarāma, and he angrily drew her towards himself with his plough and bathed. In this painting, Balarāma, holding a pestle, is diverting the course of the Jamunā with his plough. Jamunā is personified by the dark lady holding a vessel containing water following the plough. On one side is Kṛishṇa with two cowherds. In a corner, a cowherd is driving a flock of cows. This painting is out of a series painted at Chamba, before the arrival of Guler artists. It has a naive charm, which cannot fail to impress.

M.S. RANDHAWA

¹ Randhawa, *Kangra Paintings of the Bihārī Sat Sai*, New Delhi, 1966, p. 46.













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